Fire of Youth -- by Henry James Forman

Continued from Last Sunday

CHAPTER X.

Vilma.

"THE truth of the matter is," Anthony said, with his face very close to hers, "you are so overpoweringly beautiful that I am afraid of you."

She was reclining in a chaise longue among billows of cushions, with her bare arms behind her head. She laughed softly.

"Afraid of me? How funny!" And she laughed again. There was a faint flavor of foreignness to her speech that gave it an enchanting piquancy, and her laugh was music.

"Haven't you found that men are afraid of you?" he pressed, bending a little nearer to her.

"Ye-es," she drawled languidly, her eyes veiled with an attempt at reminiscence. "There was a call-boy once in a theatre where I sang. He was afraid to death of me."

That was too much for Anthony.

"Well, I'm no call-boy," he murmured thickly.

He kissed her passionately and her full lips made magical response. His arm was about her neck and he held her close lest her lips should fall away from his.

"Vilma—Vilma—Vilma!" he murmured, and again he kissed her with a savage, an almost brutal violence, and Vilma laughed.

"What a—wild boy you are!" she purred. She drew his head down again and imprinted a gentler kiss on his mouth. Anthony, with his pulses thundering in his ears, was still leaning over her, his eyes feasting upon her beauty. She was wearing an exquisite short evening frock, black with a shimmer of gold quivering through it, and her black slippers and silken ankles seemed the essence of beauty to him. The deepened flush on her cheeks and the somewhat disordered condition of her hair made her irresistibly enticing.

"And now," he said to her, almost mournfully, "what are you going to do with me?"

"Do with you?" and she gave a faltering little laugh, caressing and deep down in her throat. He could see the white skin over her neck quivering. "Why, I am going to be very fond of you, my dear."

"Going to be," he repeated disconsolately. "I am mad about you—utterly mad."

"But that is as it should be," she mumured. "Do you think it would be nice for me to throw myself at your head?"

"No fear of that," he said, a shade gloomily, and she rippled with laughter, for she knew herself to be an artist.

"You really are a dear, you know," she gazed at him fondly.

"Only a week we have known each other," he cried, jumping from his chair and resting on the foot of the chaise longue, "and it seems a lifetime—simply because all life before that doesn't count. How do such things happen?"

"If you don't take care, Anthony, I shall be terribly fond of you—talking like that," she spoke slowly, with laughing eyes. He knelt down beside her and kissed both her hands.

"Where did you learn that?" she asked, cajoling. "What other women have there been?"

"There's never been anybody until I met you," and the sincerity of his tone genuinely touched her.

"Ah, well," she covered her query soothingly, "I did not mean to ask that. Voila! Here we are—what does anything else matter?" She felt she was quite able to face his past. "Aren't you glad we dined to-night? So sweet!"

"Glad! That's hardly the word."

"Well, what is the word then?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm too happy for words."

"Are you really happy, dear? Why don't you smile then? You look just a little sad now." She caressed his head with her soft fingers.

"That's for the past—before we knew each other."

"My dear boy," she protested earnestly, "you must not think of that. The first thing you have to learn is to live for the day. Let's be happy, happy while we can."

To Anthony she seemed the incarnation of joy. Her very atmosphere was happiness. Her beauty, her dress, her rooms all blended into a harmony so delicate that he could not have put into words the sensuous pleasure of it. The polish of the furniture, the rose tints of the room, the hangings, the soft light diffused by the rose-shaded lamps—all merged into the harmony of her setting. A little marble Venus, an exquisite thing, faced her on the top of the escritoire, and Vilma was to Anthony more beautiful than the deathless goddess of love, for Vilma was soft and throbbing with life. All his previous existence, he felt, had been but a prelude to this.

Wild desires obsessed him suddenly to give her everything, to present her with costly and beautiful objects, to shower things upon her, to surround her with yet greater luxury. But he realized abruptly that he was only a clerk in the customers' room of Cass Liggett & Co.

"What are you thinking about?" she queried softly, noting his reverie.

"About you, of course," he said.

"What about me?"

"Oh, the things I should like to give you, to do for you, to serve you."

"That's very pretty," she said. "But I don't want anything, dear boy. Your affection is very sweet to me."

"I want you to wear it," he said, determinedly clasping it about her neck, "and say you will be engaged to me."

"That's like you," was all he could say.

"Come," she urged gayly, drawing him nearer to her, "Tell me something about yourself, your life—your dreams."

"My dreams—you are the best of all my dreams," he told her, "and I don't want to wake up."

"How love-ly!" she cooed with laughter. "Well, talk to me in your sleep then."

Haltingly, even jerkily at first, he told her something of life in the western country, in Little Rapids. He gained in confidence as he talked and Vilma was a trained and capable listener to stories of men's lives.

Among his omissions figured Adela and Grace Thomas. His college life he slurred over quickly, for he was already experienced enough to perceive that the interest of that is small for any one but the collegian himself. To others it conveys the impression of a grown man in leading strings, and that is never an exhilarating object of contemplation. He told her something of his newspaper work and of his coming to Cass Liggett's.

"So you see," he concluded, "how dull and uninteresting has been my life until I met you. It simply doesn't count at all."

"But other women," she protested, "what about them? Surely there must have been some others?"

"Oh, I suppose so," he gave a confused laugh, "one or two girls—but nothing of any consequence."

"Ah, that is better," she smiled. "But never mind," she murmured tenderly, "if you don't want to tell me I don't wish to hear about them!" She had no desire to establish a precedent for confidences in kind. And she drew him to her and kissed him almost maternally. Then suddenly, almost roughly pushing him from her with both hands, she murmured:

"And now you must go, dear boy—you really must."

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The next morning Anthony's work in the office of Cass Liggett & Co. alternated between fits of zealous attention and moods of abstraction. Anthony had many things to perturb him. He had grown consciously older during the last four weeks. His homesickness for the easy flowing existence of the newspaper office, for its air of constant excitement and mystery, had not quite worn off even now. He knew the excruciating pain of the lover wondering how the woman he loves is spending her time. Newspaper men are perhaps no cleverer than others, but they certainly are more disillusioned. So far indeed does disillusion often go with them that in the fullness of time they frequently arrive at the exaggerated state of sentimentality, as though life were revenging itself for too intimate a knowledge of its seamy side. Anthony had not reached that passage into Nirvana. He was still young enough to let his newly acquired worldly wisdom trouble him, in flashes, even in his own intimate life—as though that life were somebody else's. He was aware that a woman like Vilma Vanleer had not sat in a bower, maidenly expectant of his coming. She had traveled and lived much in the cosmopolitan world. With violence, however, he kept thrusting such obtrusive notions away from him.

Also, he had not yet written to Jim Howard of the step he had taken in changing from the paper to the broker. That he reluctantly recognized as his first and immediate obligation.

There was a customer in the office, a retired button maker named Judd, who did more talking and less buying than almost any one else in the room. Having given up a lifetime of office routine because he was bought out by a competitor, Judd, a man of sixty, never cleanly shaven, with a straggling, nicotine-stained gray moustache, and a half-chewed, unlighted cigar hanging dejectedly from his teeth, had made Liggett's his office, because to come to an office daily was an imperious need of his nature. Heretofore he had confined his conversation to his fellow customers. But since Anthony's advent he had singled him out as a recipient for his wisdom and advice.

"Son," he remarked to Anthony from under his low-hanging hat brim that morning, "you mark my words, this is a time to sell."

"All right, Mr. Judd," was the reply, "what shall we sell for you?"

"For me? Nothin'. But you, son—you look downright troubled—as if you was long of stocks. Sell 'em, I say, and take your loss."

"I haven't a share of stock in the world," laughed Anthony mirthlessly. "I never speculate."

The old man winked and his damaged cigar jerked between his lips.

"Shucks!" he said. "Every broker speculates. They say they don't, but they do. However, if so be you don't, son, then I'll tell you what's the matter with you."

"There's not a thing the matter with me."

"You're in love!" cried the old-man exultantly. "In love—that's what it is."

Anthony smiled wearily and shook his head.

"They're only two things really bother a young man," pursued Judd; "one's money, the other's women. Put yourself where they can't touch you and you'll be"——

"In jail or dead," laughed Anthony ruefully.

"Happy, I was goin' to say," went on the old man solemnly; "but maybe you're right. Maybe the only way to steer clear of money or women is to be in jail—or dead."

"Gracious! You are cheerful today, Mr. Judd!"

"Well, this ain't a cheerful world, son."

Anthony contrived to elude him, but he found himself wistfully regarding his careless, happy state of a few weeks ago, when life was so much less complex.

Ten minutes later, however, every cloud on his horizon had vanished into the empyrean. Vilma had called him up and, with due regard to the ears of the telephone girls and switchboard operators, had informed him that she was happy as the day was long and that, instead of going out to dinner, they would have a bite of supper that evening in her apartment.

The day wore on for him in a turbulent complexity. There were consultations with Liggett, talks with other customers besides the garrulous Judd, acceptance of orders, both in the office and over the telephone for buying and selling, and a discreet notification of the customers that their orders had been executed. The wires, with the hidden telephone clerk to direct them, seemed to be the agents of that office, as they are of most brokerage offices. Somewhere in a central reservoir called the Stock Exchange, from which those wires radiated, was the source of all of these financial transactions varying in scope from a few shares to several thousands. A mysterious personage at the source called the floor member kept the flow, backward and forward, of executed orders. It was a remarkable mechanism and still absorbingly novel to Anthony.

Cass Liggett himself came frequently from his private room into the customers' room, watching the board, chatting with customers, watching Anthony, suggesting, advising in brief, friendly, often monosyllabic words, for he did not expect too much.

"A live wire," was his comment to a silent partner in an inner room. "Give him a year or two and he'll make a good broker."

With a vast relief Anthony left the office that afternoon without lingering after the close of the market for the smoke and intimate chat over the day's battle. He longed to be by himself. He hated the subway and generally used the elevated, but to-day he was unconscious of the stuffiness underground in his effort to reach his room swiftly. He must be by himself where he could think undisturbed. There was the Jim Howard letter still to write.

How she had kissed him! And how lovingly her soft arms—those fragrant arms!—had encircled him. There never was such a woman. No one could understand dress and perfume as a woman who had been on the stage. Simplicity was all very well, but adornment was a woman's natural province, and Vilma was an artist in it. "I shall be terribly fond of you," she had said. Fond of him! Why had she taken this fancy to him? These things were inexplicable—happily—the operation of mysterious ineluctable forces.

A few weeks ago he would not have dreamed that he could dare make love to such a woman. He had dreamed of brilliant possibilities, of beautiful women, vaguely far in the distant and beckoning future, but not so soon. . . . Yet here was the reality. . . . Was it a reality or was it a dream? Life was astonishingly, inexplicably rich.

There was that letter to Jim. Well, luckily he was his own master. He had gone into Cass Liggett & Co. because he wanted to do it. Who should say him nay? A man has to follow his own line of developed in accordance with his tastes and temperament.

For a long time, it seemed to him, he sat brooding in his room, his consciousness now expanding to vast vague dreams, now contracting to a pin's point. Then, on a sudden, he seized pen and paper and wrote a friendly, affectionate, a charming letter to Jim. He had embraced this opportunity, he said, in order to acquire some notion of business and finance. "There's a newspaper man here in New York," he wrote, "one of the best and most successful ones, who says that there are two things in which the American people are more interested than in anything else, and these things are money and politics. A newspaper man has to understand both." He made no apologies and no specific excuses. He simply concluded his letter with cordiality and warmth.

That letter accomplished, he sighed with a profound sense of relief. It had been hanging over him like a confession or an income tax return, and now he felt himself free and shriven. Without dressing formally he changed his gray office clothes to a dark blue costume he affected, and went forth into the sharp wintry evening. The nipping air was no more eager than he, for nothing is more eager than a young man's feet on the way to a tryst.

Vilma's apartment was in Fortieth street, overlooking Bryant Park, and Anthony's first impulse was to take the Fifth avenue bus. But at that precise moment any vehicle was too cramped to contain him. He must walk. The lights of Fifth avenue stirred him to reminiscence of Grace Thomas, for he remembered the first time he had seen them. A remote age that seemed to be, in the background and abysm of time. He smiled to himself.

"Experience!" he whispered to the night, as though softly invoking a dread and tutelary deity, a Setebos, a god to be feared and held in awe, yet blindly, devotedly worshipped.

The moment he approached Vilma's door, however, the turbulence of his emotions swept all other thoughts aside. He had flown up the three flights to the apartment. The building had no elevator. It was very discreet. You rang the bell downstairs, and by the time you walked up to the correct apartment a door would be slightly ajar and half a face visible. Recognition, the door would open and close and you were in Paradise.

It was not Vilma but Leonie who opened the door. Leonie, the cheery and trusted French maid of all work, who came by the day, kept Vilma's apartment in order, cooked for her upon occasion, and even dressed her when need was. Except to the solid and respectable householder all servant problems are solvable in New York.

"Monsieur," said Leonie with becoming dignity, as she admitted him, and noiselessly she disappeared into her kitchenette, a room

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